

# Proper communication the key to ageing well:

## The latest challenge in speech-language pathology and audiology

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In Québec, the most recent demographic data indicate a steady decline in the less than 20 years old age group, a trend which began at the end of the 60s. In absolute number, Québec's statistics at mid-century, i.e. in 2051, should show 1 million less individuals in the 0-19 years old age group compared to 1971. At the same time, the percentage of individuals aged 65 or more, which corresponded to 7% in 1971, will climb to 27% in 2031 and 30% at mid-century. The year 2015 will prove memorable in this respect, as the number of people aged 65 or more in Québec will surpass the number of individuals 15 years old or less. The OOAQ will also be celebrating 65 years of history in 2020! This new reality thus calls for the adaptation/reorganization of the entire health network and the cooperation of all health professionals.

Audiology and speech-language pathology are at the forefront of this demographic shock. Although, on one hand, ageing is often associated with a decrease in the practice of sports, an increase in weight as a result of overeating, and the replacement of work by new retirement activities, communication needs, on the other hand, tend to increase at this particular point in time. Not only do the communication skills of the elderly benefit younger people when discussing life experiences, they also enable the elderly to maintain and even consolidate their social network. And what about the importance of communication to share the frustrations arising from the loss of independence that comes with ageing, or to share one's feelings regarding one of these conditions waiting to manifest themselves in later years.

The phenomenon takes on even greater importance as the increase in life expectancy as a result of good health leaves the elderly with more time to learn new things, including new languages – a time where proper

communication skills are very important. All in all, proper communication is key to ageing well.

The golden years are also associated with a time where neurological impairments are more frequent. It bears reminding that more than 7% of individuals aged 65 or more (more than 30% of people aged 85 or more) suffer from some form of dementia (e.g. Alzheimer's disease). Added to this number are other neurodegenerative conditions affecting the 65 or less age group (e.g. Parkinson's disease) and cardiovascular diseases, which today are the lot of several elderly people as a result of lifestyle changes (physical exercise, eating habits). If we were to add to this picture the most frequent functional losses (e.g. hearing loss, tinnitus), we would have a better understanding of the many factors that can alter the nervous system of the elderly. These conditions are also responsible for the frequent language, speech, hearing and swallowing disorders. The elderly are therefore in need of a major adaptation of clinical practices from audiologists and speech-language pathologists.

The Editorial Board of the *Fréquences* magazine was therefore on the right track. This special issue on ageing should be viewed as an awareness tool and an invitation to reflect on the changing roles of our professions as a result of this new demographic reality. It obviously proved impossible to draw a complete picture and provide an overall view of the various intervention approaches. Those responsible for the publication of this special issue have markedly decided to depict a certain number of rapidly-evolving professional fields and practices, bridging psychosocial approaches which have now earned their merits. Indeed, not only is it important to focus on issues such as caregiver support to those suffering from communication disorders, but we must also keep abreast of rapidly-evolving

practices in our diagnosis and management of hearing, language and speech disorders resulting from central or peripheral nervous system conditions.

Contributions made for the release of this special issue directly stem from research in audiology and speech-language pathology on ageing and clearly show the motivation of Québec's research in communication sciences and related disorders. The first two contributions address hearing disorders. The article prepared by Jean-Pierre Gagné and Kenneth Southal clearly summarizes the problems linked to presbycusis and the intervention strategies that must be implemented. The article clearly shows the link between hearing system deficiencies and the impact on handicap situations or the occurrence of difficult moments in communication situations requiring auditory data collection.



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The importance of the psychosocial approach is well identified. The second article, written by Sylvie Hébert, addresses the issue of tinnitus, a widespread phenomenon among the elderly, which chronically undermines one's quality of life. The article clearly demonstrates the importance of surpassing the mere audiological aspects through examples of links that exist between the presence of tinnitus and certain general individual aspects in terms of reaction to stress. The work performed in cooperation with Sonia Lupien, specialist on stress and related impacts, is a source of inspiration as to how interdisciplinary approaches could benefit communication disorders among the elderly.

The article written by Karine Marcotte, Paolo Vitali, Ana Paula Delgado and Ana Inés Ansaldo clearly illustrates a teamwork approach, involving doctoral students, a researcher and clinician. The article shows that an elderly person suffering from long-standing chronic aphasia can nevertheless benefit from the effects of a systematic speech-language intervention, whose impacts can be measured both behaviourally and neurobiologically. This study should be viewed as a source of hope for those who are dealing with a chronic communication handicap as a result of aphasia. Individuals in charge of the Québec health system must also be made aware of such work, as it shows the benefits of a speech-language intervention whose duration goes beyond the usual time allotted for such interventions. Moreover, the study describes the increased potential of combining speech-language pathology and functional neuroimaging researches. Functional neuroimaging research offers objective facts that enable to demonstrate the link between a speech-language intervention and the impacts on the functional reorganization of the brain for language purposes. Surely, a story to be followed...

The following three articles address different aspects of neurodegenerative diseases and their impacts on communication skills. The contribution made by Laura Monetta and Marc Pell sheds new light on traditional knowledge about communication disorders in individuals with Parkinson's disease. Indeed, these individuals must live with language disorders that are greater than the speech disorders usually associated with this clientele. Laura Monetta and Marc Pell demonstrate that individuals suffering from Parkinson's disease show pragmatic language skill disorders.

For several of these individuals, this communication disorder aspect of Parkinson's disease is a new fact. As such, we must offer this population the possibility of treating these disorders, in addition to those that can affect their speech.

The article prepared by Joël Macoir rounds up the facts on language disorders that form an integral part of the symptoms associated with most neurological conditions at the source of dementia. Although the presence of these disorders are relatively well known in Alzheimer patients, their characteristics in other forms of dementia (Lewy body dementia, frontotemporal dementia, etc.) are less known. Joël Macoir's contribution perfectly summarizes the challenges facing speech-language pathologists, compared to other health professionals involved in such management (neurologists, neuropsychologists, etc.). This article addresses the importance of the role played by speech-language pathologists when caring for this population.

In conclusion, Sven Joubert's article illustrates the complexity of the impacts of certain neurodegenerative conditions on communication. The particular case of semantic dementia is fully examined, from a descriptive to an assessment point of view. This article clearly shows the importance of pursuing research as little is known about the nature of underlying cognitive processes affected by each form of dementia. Sven Joubert's contribution is truly an invitation to collaboration through a multidisciplinary approach.

In all, this special *Fréquences* magazine issue should help make audiologists and speech-language pathologists aware of the extent of the task at hand. The demographic evolution of the population is an irreversible phenomenon for which we must prepare. To do so, careful planning by public decision-makers, the evolution of training environments and a collective strategy for ensuring continuing education is required. We must begin now, as 2015 is fast approaching.

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Girard C., Létourneau E. et Thibault, N. 2004, La composition par âge de la population du Québec d'ici 2051. *Données démographiques en bref*, vol. 8, n° 2, p. 3-5.

<http://www.statcan.ca/Daily/Francais/051215/q051215b.htm>

<sup>1</sup> The matter of dysphagia will be dealt with in another special issue of *Fréquences* magazine.